

Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

2012

Review Of "Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, And Orientalism In Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760" By C. Yang

Bakirathi Mani

Swarthmore College, bmani1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Bakirathi Mani. (2012). "Review Of "Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, And Orientalism In Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760" By C. Yang". *Amerasia Journal*. Volume 38, Issue 2. 174-176.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/12>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

a part of Chinese history that has begun to be unveiled to the world through literature.

Zhan Qiao
Jinan University

PERFORMING CHINA: VIRTUE, COMMERCE, AND ORIENTALISM IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND, 1660-1760. By Chi-ming Yang (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 270 pp. hardcover, \$70).

What can be learned from the example of China? In *Performing China*, Chi-ming Yang explores the material and cultural relationship between England and China in the early modern period. To the English, China was known as an ancient civilization as well as a trading partner (hence, the English fascination with china as commodity). At the same time, China was represented in popular plays as a set of virtues, most notably through what was seen as Confucian attitudes towards family, children, and marriage. In literary and social texts ranging from eighteenth-century drama to cases of Frenchmen who “passed” as Chinese, Yang reveals the paradox that has marked our relationship to China from the early modern period to the present. *Performing China* is an incisive analysis of eighteenth-century English representations of China, but it is also a critique of the epistemological conditions that produce an idea of “China” in the West.

Focusing on China as spectacle and as commodity, Yang forwards a new interpretation of Orientalism that revises Edward Said’s thesis to incorporate the example of China. Whereas Said’s work “emphasizes a nineteenth-century discourse of backwardness, sensuality, despotism, effeminacy. . . generated primarily by Western representations of Islamic Middle East” (25), in the case of eighteenth-century England, China becomes known through ambivalence. Such an ambivalent relationship is generated by the disparate temporalities that characterize China in English literary and material culture: namely, the dissonance between China as “modern commodity culture” and as “ancient civilization” (25).

Each chapter of *Performing China* examines the ambivalence that structures the relationship between England and China, demonstrating how such affective feelings circulate in popular and canonical texts. Chapter one focuses on Elkanah Settle’s play, *The Conquest of China, By the Tartars* (1676). In her reading,

Yang highlights the figure of Amavanga, the “Chinese Amazon” who passes as a man in the play. Drawing on contemporary debates in queer studies, Yang argues for the “female effeminacy” of Amavanga, whose heroic virtues also reveal the “cultural effeminacy” that shaped Orientalism in early modern England (37). Yang also productively recuperates the term “hethnic” to describe figures such as Amavanga. Originally used to refer to non-Christians and non-Jews, here Yang deploys “hethnic” and “hethnicity” as a means of exploring hierarchies of civilizational, racial, and gendered difference that characterized eighteenth-century England (65).

Chapter two draws on another example of a “hethnic,” in the figure of George Psalmanazar, who portrayed himself as a Christian convert from Formosa (now Taiwan). Moving from literary to social text, Yang deploys performance theory as a means of reading the spectacular passing of Psalmanazar and the ambivalent affect generated by his life’s work. As Yang writes, “Heathen conversion is a particular type of performance, one that posits a journey from barbarism to civilization. . . . Having crossed from other to self, [the convert] bears the burden of proof and the negotiation of the binaries of East and West” (75). What makes Psalmanazar’s case so exceptional is his consistent performance of fraud, in that he was a European impersonating an Asian convert. Drawing together a copious archive of sources, including Psalmanazar’s own writings, Yang reads his life and work as an exemplary performance of “China” in eighteenth-century England, a performance whose veracity relied less on “any physical markers of alterity” and more on “demonstrations of piety and cultural alterity” (81). Psalmanazar’s racial and religious passing, Yang argues, “refuses Orientalism’s self-other dichotomy. It demonstrates, more than simply the difference between a real and a fake Asia, how cross-cultural exchanges produce a visible syncretism and hybridity at work” (109).

Chapters three and four expand upon these notions of syncretism and hybridity. Challenging dominant constructions of Orientalism as simply a hegemonic representation of “the East” by “the West,” Yang demonstrates how eighteenth-century England also sought to reproduce and rearticulate Chinese virtues. Whether through the circulation of popular Oriental fables, commodity culture (for example, the English fascination for “japaning,” an imitation of Asian lacquerwork), or through theatrical performance, Yang showcases how through “the channels of

commodity exchange, even the most un-Christian of ideas acquire value upon entering the sphere of domestic consumption" (146). This final example of China, rendered through moral behavior, succinctly captures Yang's argument for the centrality of China to eighteenth-century English philosophical, material, and literary discourse.

What, then, does Yang's book have to offer to scholars of Asian American Studies? First, through her theorizing of the place of China in early modern England, Yang offers a method of studying Orientalism through affect. By focusing on liminal figures such as Psalmanazar, whose performance of conversion produced an ambivalent response from both supporters and critics, Yang shows us how moral behavior becomes one way in which we understand the alterity of culture and race. Her sustained focus on China as an exemplary site of postcolonial critique—rather than as an exception—also broadens the historical and geographical reach of postcolonial studies.

Second, Yang shows us how our current obsession with China—and those virtues considered "Chinese"—have historical roots in the early modern period. Then as now, "China was imagined to contain the secrets of maintaining past glory in a commercialized present" (25). Yang draws on two contemporary examples in her book: the 1998 performance of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* in the Forbidden City and the 2008 opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics. These spectacular performances of "China" within China, both directed by filmmaker Zhang Yimou, are central to "the ongoing reinvention of the Orient" (195) for a global audience, as the breathless international media coverage accompanying both performances attested to the temporal dissonance between an "ancient" and "modern" China. That American viewers had a profoundly ambivalent relationship to both events demonstrates how the example of China is crucial not simply to our existing repertoire of Orientalist representations of Asia and Asians in the U.S., but also to the "transcultural production of knowledge" about both East and West (196). By delineating the complex historical circuits through which culture becomes commodity, *Performing China* highlights how our consumption of such commodities reshapes the relation between self and other.

Bakirathi Mani
Swarthmore College